

On 10/29/03 1:24 PM, "konrad" <konrad@PANIX.COM wrote:

On Tue, 28 Oct 2003, William C. Wees wrote:

They are documents savored and deconstructed at the same time, thanks to the labors of archivist-connoisseur-social critic-artist Ken Jacobs.

Star Spangled to Death might be considered the only truly avant-garde work in „Views‰ if you accept Peter Bürger,s argument that the avant-garde is defined by its opposition to the institution of art and, consequently, the avant-garde artist does not produce „art works‰ but art „manifestations‰. But that,s too big a topic to get into here.

Oh why not? Since Burger said that the neo avant garde is false, since the rebellion was lost with the first wave (dada and surrealists), it's not clear how it applies to a-g film. His book is totally facscinating and yet a little too totalizing, since he really doesn't deal with film properly at all, as one of multiple institutions of Art. So in fact i think you are right on with that call about Jacobs, since his work is so unpackagable and, in a word, obstreperous, at the same time that it's critical and fascinating and lush. It's like he has one foot inside the canon and one outside it, a split Duchamp could appreciate.

[snip]

or two earlier Brakhage films to each of the short-film programs. Along with the previously-scheduled recent films, these additions reminded us of Brakage,s mastery of the art of cinema (and, I felt, subtly suggested that many younger filmmakers, including some included in „Views,% have been influenced by Brakhage, whether they know it or not).

One might say that viewers are also 'influenced' to see work as "like Brakhage." I hope the revelation of influence wasn't the only reason to juxtapose certain films. The word "influence" itself glosses and hides so much, because there are as many influences from one work as there are people influenced by it, so what's to generalize?

then Mark replied " I was not trying to make a statement about influence as much as affinity -I did not want to isolate these films. The films were chosen specifically in relation to the other films on the announced programs and for their brevity and relevance. That is all I wish to say about it."

Thank you for that word "affinity" Mark -- perfect.

We saw the films of a Swiss filmmaker Hannes Schupbach (whom Courtney wrote about on Frameworks from last year's "Views" show) in Berkeley last night. There were strong affinities between his lovely silent montages and filmmakers like Beavers, Brakhage, Baillie and Dorsky. Does that make him "influenced?"

While speaking to Scott Stark the other day we were both talking about how

Ernie Gehr's work means so much to us, and to us it seemed most appropriate to say that his work *gives us a kind of permission* to do something we already want to do. That's not quite influence, and it doesn't make our work derivative, but it does make some films a kind of response to his, just as i imagine some of the films in the "Views" programs are in response to other work, often multiple works.

[snip]

On the other hand, some of the footage in the Jonas Mekas program should have stayed in the can and on the shelf: „out-of-focus home movies„ I thought to myself. Whereas, other films in the program were exquisite, vintage Mekas. Show the best`forget the rest..

That could also be an anti-institutional impulse, a kind of life force, if you will, which strikes me as kind of interesting (okay, okay: from a distance) coming from the man who institutionalized avant garde film as much as anyone, in a show that represents the institutionalization of the avant garde. But i don't know: a gesture can be succesful on one level and completely fail at several others.

konrad

On 10/29/03 4:23 PM, "David Westling" <dwestling@SBCGLOBAL.NET wrote:

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But isn't this reliance on such limiting definitions problematic in itself? We need not accept either of these two global statements, that the avant-garde is "defined by its opposition to the institution of art", and that "the rebellion was lost with the first wave". In the first place, we must inquire into the meaning of the phrase "institution of art" in the former example. As a reified, monolithic entity, the avant-garde indeed must provide an alternative. But Konrad said it well when he alluded to Duchamp's connection to the Great Tradition, which the (other) Surrealists also deigned to engage. I assure you, the rebellion has not yet been properly undertaken; there is a response to Camus, an extension to Breton, a clarifiacation of Duchamp that is waiting in the wings. Surrealism's great

quandary, never able to really extricate itself from the quagmire of its Marxist and otherwise collectivist tendencies, betrayed a deep confusion about the nature of liberation. Does the individual's liberation presuppose a general liberation on the social level? From the point of view of radical nominalism, this question doesn't make sense, at least the last part of it.

David Westling

On 10/29/03 6:44 PM, "konrad" <konrad@PANIX.COM wrote:

On Wed, 29 Oct 2003, David Westling wrote:

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I think in the first place one should read Buerger's book, The Theory of the Avant Garde. It's a lot more intelligently argued than you're giving credit for.

The point about Jacobs' work is that, like the avant garde of those halcyon days around WW I, it appears to be trying to supercede the split between art and practical life, to make art matter again in real life, not just in the realm of artistic dialog (just say no to 'art for art's sake) and not just to do so by being engaged through ideology or identity politicking.

I'm not going to argue for that in this case, because i didn't see the show, but hearing him lecture/teach, and seeing his screenings over the years, i feel like his work does try to wrestle with even it's being Art, inserting huge chunks of 'reality' (the whole "Checkers speech"?!?) into the performance, making it sometimes ungainly, unmanagable and contrary, but something that you have to deal with anyway -- like life! At the same time it's respectful of the sensuous image, the flicker, and the experience of sight and time. It's critical, respectful, disdainful and sensual at the same time in its reworking of our image culture.

I'd be really interested to hear other people's thoughts on any films in the 'Views' program -- don't feel like you have to review the whole show

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konrad

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On 11/3/03 9:08 AM, "Roger Beebe" <rogerbb@ENGLISH.UFL.EDU wrote:

I've got a question about the recent musings (largely by Konrad) about Jacobs & his connection to the project of the historical avant garde as spelled out by Burger. What I'm specifically wondering is about the question of the institutions of the avant garde. When

Konrad suggests that Jacobs may be attempting a reconciliation of the Art World and everyday life by incorporating huge unedited chunks of TV & such in his work, it strikes me that we're talking merely at the level of form (or content if we understand form and content as separable entities); what Jacobs doesn't seem to be doing (or at least what we haven't been talking about if he is doing it) is challenging the institutionalization of the avant garde at precisely such events as Views from the Avant Garde. So even at the formal level, he may be attempting a rapprochement of the Art World and everyday life, but only WITHIN the Art World. That is, I thought Burger's gloss on dada/surrealism was that there was an attempt to integrate art (back) into everyday life whereas all that the Jacobs seems to be doing--and admittedly I haven't seen it, so I'm relying on the discussion here--is integrating everyday life into art. Those seem to me to be substantially different projects, and the latter seems to me somewhat less radical than the former (in its acceptance of the Art World as the primary locus of intervention). In this light, I guess I'd be more inclined to say that the recent touring shows by folks like Bill Brown, Tom Comeford, Vanessa Renwick, Matt McCormick, et al. do more to reintegrate art into the everyday than does showing a work that contains hours of taped TV at the Walter Reade. I certainly don't mean to discount what the Jacobs piece appears to be doing or what Views from the Avant Garde represents, but I did want to point to this other set of institutional questions. And I do mean it to be a question--I'm very curious to hear others' thoughts on this.

...
Roger

p.s. For the record, I'm omitting the umlaut in Burger's name & have decided against the "Buerger" spelling preferred by Konrad. I'm sure it's more phonetically appropriate, but it looks strange to me.

On 11/3/03 8:48 PM, "Sam Wells" <samw@VOICENET.COM wrote:

Views from the Avant-Garde may be the "Institutional Avant-Garde" (although I almost have a hard time saying that in sobriety, I mean, what, the screen is big and the seats are very comfortable, so this is what Institutional is like, huh; wait'll the folks back in Peoria here about this !) but -- is it really the Art World (TM) ??

Secretly, I kind of wish it was some outpost of The Art World (TM)

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I'm not familiar with those shows, so, how do they do this ?

-Sam (Patent Pending)

On 11/4/03 12:00 PM, "konrad" <konrad@PANIX.COM wrote:

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Maybe reconciliation isn't the right word. The 'historic avant garde' -- meaning the dadaists, surrealists, and i believe analytic cubism and perhaps some of the futurists were reacting to the development of a realm of culture reserved for artistic dialog, in a word: aestheticism. This is my gloss on Booger's Theory ... book. It means attacking the institution, but the institution absorbed the attack with the counter move of appropriation. Bill Wees said he thought Jacobs' work was in that tradition of the avant garde. One can attack the institution, from within, just as Fountain was submitted to a 'new art' exhibition by a member of the committee (clandestinely).

I think the gesture of including an enormously long show, with a whole speech by Nixon in it, is not too far from questioning what can be a film. As Fountain demanded: what can be a sculpture? I.e. what is the credential that you have to have to get into the exhibition. Credentials come into being at the same time as the institutions that issue them. So it seems like using that forum is a reasonable way to leverage your critique, to use the institution against itself, to sabotage it.

However on further reflection, it seems that the critical aspect of Duchamp's gesture was to do it on the sly, where as in Jacobs' case, he *has* credentials already, so they get him in the door.

Still, there is something so aggressively non-commercial about a lot of his work that it can't engage the financial structure that keeps the institution in place, and like Sam said, the avant garde film world is hardly a rock of an institution that the studio-gallery-collector-museum world is.

I would ask a similar question of your examples though. Those touring shows, while they are bringing Art to the People, which might appear to be a reconciliation, still risk begging the question, by creating a kind of alternative gig circuit. What are their aspirations for that kind of presentation? Is it really doing something about the institution or just extending its reach?

konrad

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On 11/7/03 1:33 PM, "Roger Beebe" <rogerbb@ENGLISH.UFL.EDU wrote:

I agree with both Sam & Konrad that we're clearly not talking about prized commodities being unfurled at Views from the Avant Garde (even art world commodities a la Matthew Barney), so the (TM) in my original post was probably excessive. That said, I think it's a mistake to conflate institutionalization with commodification. I'm not really convinced that the main problem that the historical avant gardes were reacting against was commodification; my sense is that problem becomes the central dilemma later. For the historical avant garde, isn't the main problem in fact the ossification of art as institution (i.e., institutionalization in a more strict and literal sense)? Historically this takes the form of aestheticism, as Konrad following Burger suggests, which is nothing more than the development of an autonomous institution that forever seeks to separate art from everyday life. And this is where I think that Jacobs/Views doesn't quite live up to the claims that Konrad offered in his first email. The people who head to Views know to some extent what they're going to get--Art. Does encountering some large chunks of the everyday undermine that? I'd argue that it doesn't (at least not radically so) when marked with the double signature of Jacobs (institutional/canonical avant gardist) and Views (renowned institution of the avant garde).

I wanted to respond also to the questions about the traveling film shows by Bill Brown, et al., but I'm having difficulty formulating a good general answer. Basically, my sense is that these shows are programmed in a real variety places, some mini-art institutions (galleries like Heaven in Chicago), some really not art institutions at all (bars, rock clubs, people's homes, warehouses), and some with a liminal status between the two (microcinemas). The first of these may only represent an inter-institutional battle to determine which art counts, who gets to say what counts, etc. without displacing the institution of art in any significant way. I guess I'm more hopeful about the other end of the spectrum, although I'm sure when these shows are advertised, they do mention, for example, Bill's Rockefeller grant, so they do draw on the cultural capital of their prior endorsement by the institutions. The more I write, the more pessimistic I'm feeling about all of it, so maybe I'll stop.

I am wondering though, about the strict terms of Burger's book, where the destruction of art as institution happens through interventions within the art world rather than within the fabric of everyday life--was this a limitation built into the project of the historical avant gardes? And does circumventing these institutions (if possible) represent another possible project that hasn't yet been exhausted? Whether or not all circumventions finally result in the establishment of new institutions & the circumventers themselves inevitably become emissaries of art as institution (as Konrad suggests), I'm not finally able to say.

For what it's worth,

RB

On Monday, November 3, 2003, at 11:48 PM, Sam Wells wrote:

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On 11/8/03 9:06 AM, "konrad" <konrad@PANIX.COM wrote:

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I think it's possible to identify the institution (a system) with its representations (buildings, occasions, people). If you do that, then you paralyze anyone associated with the institution, taking away from them any independence, any ability to act against the institution's interests. Granted that the way the institution self-perpetuates is to get people to align self-interest with institutional survival, but that doesn't mean it's always successful propagating that myth.

Seeing as how i wasn't at the show, and i'm backing up what someone else said, i shouldn't even be replying, except to clarify that i simply appreciate the characterization Wees gave the film, in relation to all the other films on the program. It makes me see the description in a light that distinguished it from the descriptions of those others, and i understood the gesture (as described) in some continuity with what i know of Jacobs' work and spirit, and while i concede that he's not going to "overthrow the institution," (and i doubt that is his expressed intent) i do firmly believe he is in the tradition of artists who want their work to engage actively with how we understand and act through our political, ethical, social, sexual, etc etc selves -- to effect the whole shabang, so to

speak. What happened around 1916 was people realized that art, in gaining independence and freedom to explore form and perception, had traded away efficacy and relevance to much of life, had made a separate peace.

Here's an entry from Hugo Ball's journal, 5.IV.1916:
"We discuss the theories of art of the last few decades, always with reference to the questionable nature of art itself, its complete anarchy, its relationship with the public, race, and contemporary culture. It can probably be said that for us art is not an end in itself -- more pure naivete is necessary for that -- but it is an opportunity for true perception and criticism of the times we live in, both of which are essential for an unstriking but characteristic style. The latter does not seem to us such a simple matter as one is often inclined to think. What can a beautiful, harmonious poem say if nobody reads it because it has nothing to do with the feelings of the times? And what can a novel have to say when it is read for culture but is really a long way from even touching on culture?" [Ball is the guy who started Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich where dada came from.]

A lot has happened since those questions first came up. The 'institution' learned to cope, but the problem seems still there because that very coping co-opts so many attempts to use art to change life. Sure, Jacobs' work is not 'underground' but it is in the tradition of trying to make stuff that is both artistically and politically assertive, to be "true perception and criticism." Another danger, besides being co-opted, is getting so cynical that genuine efforts appear only self-serving, if they are not totally successful. Of course they never are.

I guess a better question (for all of us who can't argue from the *work* in question) is what is the point of an avant garde today? -- since we seem to think we have one -- and does it really function, or is it busy aestheticising itself?

Or: if you show your shorts in a bar, does that make them avant garde?

konrad

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